

# Refashioning Blackness, Refashioning Our Histories

by OMARIS ZAMORA



Conference keynote speakers Ta-Nehisi Coates and Minister Luiza Bairros.

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**WHAT DOES IT MEAN** to remodel or refashion how we think about blackness? What does it look like to talk about the African diaspora, but without focusing the discussion on Africa?

The 2013 Lozano Long Conference, *Refashioning Blackness: Contesting Racism in the Afro-Americas*, brought together scholars, activists, educators, and policymakers to revisit how we think about blackness in the Americas, but more specifically, to think about the experience of Afro-descendants in Latin America, the Caribbean, and those who have migrated to the United States. Understanding the African diaspora in the Americas is to convey how blackness as a racial experience can vary depending on the location.

As Black Studies scholar Brent Hayes Edwards suggests, diaspora has its moments with which people identify, or not, and recognize similarities as well as differences. When we understand that the African diaspora is composed of similarities and differences, we are also acknowledging that blackness is fluid.

With this acknowledgment, we challenge the traditional conceptions of blackness to recognize other Afro-descendants whose history traces back to the middle passage, such as Afro-Latinos. “Afro-Latinos” as discussed in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (p. 1) “are people of African descent in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and by extension those of African

descent in the United States whose origins are in Latin America and the Caribbean.” In other words, it recognizes racial differences found within Latinidad and acknowledges the African presence here too. This year’s conference created a space to understand “how the Americas experience us and how we experience the Americas” as stated by Afro-Latina scholar Miriam Jiménez Román. Moreover, Afro-Latinos’ identity can be fluid as they experience moving between geographical spaces and the connections between gender, sexuality, and race. However, because they are people who have been constantly displaced, some of the (his)stories remain untold or unwritten.

Afro-Latino Studies takes on the task of revisiting blackness in different contexts of the Americas and recovering a history that had erased and made invisible the contributions and experiences of Afro-Latinos. Afro-Puerto Rican bibliophile Arturo Alfonso Schomburg is one of the first Afro-Latinos in the United States to recover that history. His contribution to this recovery helped to form the current Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture located in New York City. These recovered histories are in direct confrontation with racism and discourses that erase black bodies. As an emerging scholarly field, Afro-Latino Studies has taken on a transnational and transdisciplinary approach since the stories are revealed through different means, moments, places, and people.

The early sixteenth century marks the beginning of African peoples being brought to the Americas. The story begins in the Caribbean with the rise of sugarcane plantations as a place of major importance for labor, but also the first formations of African diasporic communities. The displacement and conditions of slavery developed a diasporic identity throughout much of the Antilles. However, the traditional history of Afro-descendants in Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico has limited itself to slavery, abolition, and the influences of African foods and rhythms in the now national cultural traditions.

Anthropology graduate student Barbara Abadía-Rexach highlighted in her presentation how blackness becomes limited to folklore during Puerto Rican holidays, but once the holidays are over, so is the homage to African ancestry. The holiday music celebrates the African heritage of the past, but Abadía-Rexach pushes her research further to examine how the music also informs processes of racialization in people's everyday lives when they engage not only with the historical past of *bomba*, but also with its present. Although the music is received as "folkloric," by exploring African-based rhythms such as *bomba*, the people come to know a different history that is not always present in grade school textbooks. To follow the past as well as the present of Afro-descendants in the Caribbean is to create an alternative history in which Afro-Latinos recognize themselves.

The recovered Afro-Caribbean history can be a moving or fluid bridge across which we can view the Americas. The way that blackness has been treated in Latin America has varied from Colombia to the Southern Cone. While the Afro-Caribbean presence on the northern coasts of Latin America can be easily recognized, it is kept at a geographical periphery. Afro-Latin Americans in places like Argentina, Chile, and Ecuador struggle for recognition from the state, but the media only continue to represent them as the antithesis of civilization. As seen in many Latin American *telenovelas*, Afro-Latin American representations in the narrative are almost always in the roles of slave, maid, waiter, prostitute, or some other black stereotype. As Jasmine Mitchell pointed out in her presentation about a mulatta *telenovela* actress,

these characters never really form part of a national identity that speaks of their own experiences as black actors.

While race in Latin America is an ongoing debate, these dialogues have informed some changes. Black social movements have been constantly fighting against racism in Brazil and Colombia in a way that has just recently influenced state politics. Among the ever-present violence that still afflicts black communities in Latin America, opportunities like affirmative action are becoming available to young people that were previously unavailable.

While changes are happening in Latin America, Afro-Latinos in the United States are also creating change and continue to recover their own history—not that history is limited to documents such as archives, but that it also acknowledges people as the tellers and writers of their own personal stories. The Afro-Latino Forum organized by Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez Román has produced *The Afro-Latin@ Reader*, an anthology that greatly contributes to the study of Afro-Latinos in the United States. This developing scholarly work that includes emerging intellectuals and urban working-class communities is allowing voices to be heard that can push back against invisibility, yet reveal the fluidity of Afro-Latino identities.

Although race is to some degree taking center stage in some countries of Latin America, it seems that a "post-racial" concept has begun to prevail in the United States, so much so that for the 2020 U.S. Census it has been proposed that "Hispanic" be listed as a race. The problem here lies in the likelihood that the category Hispanic or Latino would erase differences within Latinidad, not taking into account black, indigenous, and Asian self-identifying peoples. The Afro-Latino Forum is trying to combat this new "post-racial" notion and the effort to exclude race from Hispanic/Latino identity by creating public service announcements and opening dialogue through another forthcoming anthology and series of videos.

Ultimately, the work of Afro-Latino scholars and community members has focused on revisiting blackness and refashioning the archive that tells our stories in order to recognize our presence and contributions. There is still more work to be done and stories yet to be told. For generations to come

our responsibility as a people is to share the knowledge as a way of paying respect to those who came before us, and empowering those who will come after us. In this way we will make a place for ourselves in the world as we resist the attempts to silence us. ☀

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#### PHOTO EXHIBIT PART OF 2013 LOZANO LONG CONFERENCE



Photographer Tony Gleaton was one of the featured speakers at the 2013 Lozano Long Conference,

*Refashioning Blackness: Contesting Racism in the Afro-Americas*. An exhibit of Gleaton's work, *Africa's Legacy in Mexico, Central America, and South America*, organized by former LLILAS Community Engagement Director Natalie Arsenault and Benson Curator Julianne Gilland, opened February 20 at LLILAS Benson concurrently with the conference and featured compelling images of descendants of African slaves in the Americas. Based on Gleaton's extensive travels through Mexico in the 1980s, the original project focused on the descendants of slaves brought to New Spain in the 1500–1700s, but following travels from 1992–1996, Gleaton expanded the project to include Central and South America. His original project was exhibited by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service in the U.S. and toured in Mexico and Cuba through the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes.